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SUBJECT: UNECE Forum for the Environment Hanging in the Balance

¶1. Summary. The UN Economic Commission for Europe's (UNECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) met Oct 13-15, to seek agreement on a reform to the Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (EfE). While progress was made, there was no negotiated outcome. The major sticking points continue to be in the details of the Conference process and whether the Conference should be used to launch regional and sub-regional legally binding agreements. The committee hosted a roundtable discussion on public private partnerships and possible future cooperation with private sector representatives. The CEP also discussed work on environmental monitoring and the possible launch of a joint task force with the Conference of European Statisticians on environmental indicators. End Summary.

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Reform of the Environment for Europe Ministerial  
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¶2. The UN Economic Commission for Europe's (UNECE) Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) has served as the sponsor of the Environment for Europe Ministerial Conference (EfE) since it began in 1991. At the sixth EfE in October 2007, it was decided that the EfE process needs substantial reform if it is to remain as a program of UNECE CEP under the Secretariat of the Housing and Land Management Directorate. The EfE reform process was given a deadline of March 2009, the next meeting of the UNECE, to negotiate an outcome of the reform process.

¶3. Because scant progress was made in the October CEP meeting, the CEP will hold a special session for a final round of negotiations on January 27-29, 2009. If an agreement is reached by the CEP during this session, it will be forwarded for endorsement to the UNECE March meeting. Should the EfE be endorsed, the next Conference is tentatively scheduled for 2011 in Kazakhstan. If an agreement on the reform process can not be reached the Conference could still go forward, but not under the leadership of the UNECE.

¶4. The primary issue in the EfE reform negotiations is the costs and benefits of the process to the UNECE and the member states. In each of the last two EfEs, the UNECE preparatory process took over two years. For each of the Conferences, the negotiation of agenda topics and a ministerial declaration resulted in more than six extraordinary negotiating sessions and dominated regular meetings. The declarations, which approached 20 pages, lacked focus and provided limited added value considering the high preparatory cost. Instead of fostering a common commitment to addressing common environmental problems and assisting the countries of South East and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia, the process was more

often divisive. Some governments sought to utilize the forum to advance positions on issues for which the UNECE has no role.

¶5. The U.S. is opposing the inclusion of a negotiated UNECE Ministerial Declaration as an outcome of the EfE Conference. The focus on Ministerial Declarations detracts attention from the organization of the Conferences, which have not evolved past the rather stale tradition of a parade of Ministers delivering prepared remarks to a half empty room.

¶6. The U.S. also objects to using the EfE to launch new processes leading to negotiated regional and sub-regional agreements. The UNECE CEP is already home to five legally binding regional environmental agreements and over a dozen protocols to those agreements. While all member governments agree that the UNECE needs to focus its attention on implementation and compliance with commitments already undertaken, some Governments are insisting that the launching of new agreements is crucial to the UNECE process.

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Additional Business  
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¶7. While the UNECE CEP encourages robust participation from environmental Non-Governmental Organizations, they have not encouraged participation from the private sector. After considerable efforts by the U.S., this meeting convened two roundtables with representatives of the private sector including representatives of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the World Economic Forum and individual company representatives. The panels explored business and government

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perspectives on "public private partnerships" generally and more specifically on the topic of water. Both groups expressed the desire to explore opportunities to work together. Business stressed two points in creating successful public private partnerships: the need to establish regular channels of communication and participation; and the importance of finding common cause in environment and sustainable development issues. Industry representatives underscored the latter point by emphasizing that corporate social responsibility programs are not charities; there is an economic benefit to their activities.

¶8. The ECE reviewed and renewed the mandate of the Working Party on Environmental Monitoring. The group has sought to foster capacity and seek common approaches to environmental monitoring between developed country governments and those from countries with Economies in Transition in the UNECE. One of the more successful outcomes of this group is a proposed joint task force with the Conference of European Statisticians, which, in spite of its name, includes North American representatives as well as all OECD countries, the UN, and IFI statistical offices. This task force would look at environmental indicators; a scope of work that builds on the other work the Conference has undertaken on indicators for Sustainable Development.

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